

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
-----056287 190816Z /12

R 181224Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9707
INFO AMCONSUL HONG KONG
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
USLO PEKING

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EXDIS

DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PEPR, PBOR,MOPS, PINS, CB, VM
SUBJ: VULNERABILITY OF THE PHNOM PENH REGIME

REF: (A) BANGKOK 10552, (B) 18270,
(C) BANGKOK 21758

SUMMARY: THERE IS INCREASING EVIDENCE THAT THE POL POT
REGIME IS UNDER SERIOUS STRAIN. WE DO NOT KNOW ENOUGH
TO SPEAK WITH CERTAINTY, BUT KHMER LOSSES ON THE
VIETNAMESE FRONT, THE KAMPUCHEAN MILITARY DELEGATION
VISIT TO PEKING, LESSENER TENSIONS ON THE THAI BORDER,
AND PERSISTENT REPORTS OF PURGE AND DISSATISFACTION ALL
INCREASE DOUBT ABOUT THE LONG TERM SURVIVABILITY OF
POL POT AND HIS GOVERNMENT. MUCH, OF COURSE, WILL
DEPEND UPON THE WAY THE VIETNAMESE APPLY PRESSURE AND
WHAT SUPPORT THE PRC PROVIDES.

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THE THAIS ENVISION INCREASING SUCCESS OF A HANOI-BACKED
INSURGENCY IN KAMPUCHEA, BUT THAT IS NOT THE ONLY
REALISTIC POSSIBILITY. OTHERS ARE A REVOLT WITHIN THE
KAMPUCHEAN MILITARY, REBELLION BY REGIONAL COMMANDERS,
OR DIMINISHED CENTRAL AUTHORITY. WHATEVER THE SCENARIO,
SHOULD A NEW CENTRAL REGIME EMERGE, IT SEEMS LIKELY TO
BE MORE MODERATE THAN POL POT'S AND MORE AGREEABLE

TO REDUCING TENSIONS WITH HANOI. THAT POL POT'S DEMISE WOULD LEAD TO PARAMOUNT INFLUENCE BY HANOI IN PHNOM PENH SIMILAR TO HANOI'S ROLE IN LAOS, HOWEVER, IS UNCERTAIN. WHILE THE THAIS HAVE HAD THEIR SHARE OF PROBLEMS WITH THE POL POT REGIME, THEY RECOGNIZE THAT HOSTILITY BETWEEN HANOI AND PHNOM PENH HAS FOR THE TIME BEING REDUCED THEIR SECURITY CONCERNS, AND THEY WOULD BE DEEPLY UPSET IF VIETNAM SUCCESSFULLY UNDERMINED THE POL POT GOVERNMENT AND GAINED INCREASING INFLUENCE ON THAI BORDERS. SUCH A DEVELOPMENT WOULD PRODUCE A PROFOUNDLY DIFFICULT PSYCHOLOGICAL SITUATION FOR BANGKOK AND WOULD OBVIOUSLY RAISE MAJOR COMPLICATIONS IN DEALING WITH THE THAI INSURGENCY.

CONTINUED KAMPUCHEAN INDEPENDENCE IS IMPORTANT TO THE SECURITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFIDENCE OF THAILAND AND OTHER COUNTRIES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA. U.S. EFFORTS TO HELP ESTABLISH AN ADEQUATE POLITICAL CLIMATE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA COULD BE JEOPARDIZED BY DEVELOPMENTS IN PHNOM PENH. END SUMMARY.

1. SIGNS OF STRAIN. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS, BOTH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL, POINT UP GROWING VULNERABILITIES OF THE POL POT REGIME. FIRST AND FOREMOST, THE BORDER WAR WITH VIETNAM IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY COSTLY TO PHNOM PENH. THE INTENSE FIGHTING SINCE EARLY JUNE, PRIMARILY
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WITHIN KAMPUCHEAN TERRITORY, HAS BADLY BLED A GREATLY OUTNUMBERED KAMPUCHEAN MILITARY FORCE. ALTHOUGH WE ASSUME THAT BOTH RADIO PHNOM PENH AND RADIO HANOI INFLATE THEIR BATTLEFIELD STATISTICS, RECENT CLAIMS OF HIGH CASUALTIES PRESUMABLY REFLECT THE UPSURGE IN FIGHTING AND PROBABLY SIGNIFICANT LOSSES ON BOTH SIDES. WHILE THE KHMERS HAVE APPARENTLY DONE SURPRISINGLY WELL AGAINST THE VIETNAMESE, IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT OF KAMPUCHEA CAN LONG RESIST A DETERMINED VIETNAMESE EFFORT TO OVERTHROW IT BY A COMBINATION OF MAJOR FORCE AND SUBVERSION.

2. CORROBORATING EARLIER REPORTS (REF B), RECENT REFUGEES FROM BATTAMBANG PROVINCE ARRIVING IN THAILAND IN SHARPLY INCREASED NUMBERS, CLAIM THAT DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEAN MAIN FORCE, DISTRICT AND COOPERATIVE FORCES HAVE BEEN THINNED OUT IN NORTHWESTERN KAMPUCHEA DURING THE PAST TWO OR MORE MONTHS. THIS, COUPLED WITH THE DECLINE OF INCIDENTS ON THE THAI-KAMPUCHEA BORDER, POINT UP THE PRESSURE OF RESOURCES ON PHNOM PENH.

3. THE KHMERS NEED ARMS AND AMMUNITION WHICH ONLY PEKING

IS LIKELY TO SUPPLY. THE VISITS TO THE PRC OF KAMPUCHEA'S LEADING MILITARY FIGURE, DEPUTY PM FOR DEFENSE SON SEN, AND DEPUTY PM FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS IENG SARY, INDICATE THEIR CONTINUING REQUIREMENT FOR POLITICAL AND MILITARY SUSTENANCE. WHAT SUPPORT PEKING IS WILLING TO PROVIDE IS OF COURSE A CRUCIAL ELEMENT OF THE EQUATION.

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
-----026890 190819Z /12

R 181224Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9708
INFO AMCONSUL HONG KONG
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
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4. INTERNALLY, ACCORDING TO RECENT REFUGEES, DRACONIAN MEASURES CONTINUE TO BE APPLIED, AND DIRE CONDITIONS PERSIST. REPORTS CONTINUE OF POCKETS OF RESISTANCE POSSIBLY LED BY KHMERS TRAINED IN VIETNAM OR BY KHMER OPPONENTS OF THE POL POT REGIME. THE ATTEMPTED COUP IN JUNE AGAINST THE REGIME (REF B) AND SUBSEQUENT RUMORS THAT POL POT HAS BEEN ASSASSINATED, SPREAD PRINCIPALLY BY SOVIET DIPLOMATS IN BANGKOK IN LATE JUNE AND EARLY JULY, ADD TO THE ATMOSPHERE OF INSTABILITY CLINGING TO THE PHNOM PENH ADMINISTRATION.

5. ALTHOUGH THE REGIME IN PHNOM PENH HAS SURVIVED EIGHT MONTHS OF STRUGGLE ON ITS BORDER WITH VIETNAM, THE PROCESS OF DESTABILIZATION OF THE POL POT REGIME FORECAST IN REFS A AND B CONTINUES.

6. THE THAI ASSESSMENT. THE THAIS ARE CONCERNED WHETHER

THE EVOLUTION OF EVENTS IN INDOCHINA WILL CONTINUE TO
PROVIDE THEM THE BENEFITS FROM HANOI-PHNOM PENH
HOSTILITIES. A KEY MFA WORKING LEVEL OFFICIAL, REFLECTING
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GENERAL ATTITUDES WITHIN THE RTG, RECENTLY EXPRESSED
THE VIEW TO US THAT THE COLLAPSE OF THE POL POT REGIME
SEEMED INEVITABLE. OTHERS ARE LESS CATEGORIC BUT
INCREASINGLY PESSIMISTIC. MFA OFFICIAL BELIEVES THAT
HANOI WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CHANGE AND WILL ADVANCE
ITS INFLUENCE QUICKLY WITHIN ANY NEW REGIME IN
PHNOM PENH, EVEN SHOULD INDIGENOUS KAMPUCHEAN ELEMENTS
BE PRIMARILY INSTRUMENTAL IN OUSTING POL POT. AT THE
SAME TIME, THE OFFICIAL NOTED THAT PEKING HAD EARLIER
EXERTED CONSIDERABLE INFLUENCE, SUCCESSFULLY, ON HANOI
TO DETER THE VIETNAMESE FROM ANY OUTRIGHT MILITARY TAKEOVER
OF PHNOM PENH. BUT HANOI HAS SUBSEQUENTLY SUBTLY EMPLOYED
LIMITED MILITARY ACTION AND SUBVERSIVE TACTICS WHICH
FALL SHORT OF DEMANDING A CHINESE MILITARY RESPONSE.
THAIS BELIEVE THAT HANOI COULD MISSTEP AND EVOKE MILITARY
ACTIONS BY PEKING ON THE SINO-VIET BORDER, BUT SUCH
INCIDENTS WOULD PROBABLY BE LIMITED AND NOT PROVOKE
WARFARE BETWEEN THE PRC AND SRV. SUCH ACTIONS COULD SLOW
THE REALIZATION OF VIETNAMESE OBJECTIVES, BUT NOT
PERMANENTLY FORESTALL VIETNAMESE SUCCESS, THE THAI
OFFICIAL BELIEVES.

7. MFA SHARES OUR DIFFICULTY IN IDENTIFYING EXACTLY
WHO MIGHT SEIZE POWER FROM POL POT. VIETNAMESE HAVE
LINKED POL POT AND IENG SARY AS A CLIQUE, INDICATING
THAT IENG SARY WILL NOT BE A VEHICLE FOR HANOI'S DESIGNS.
KAMPUCHEAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY CHAIRMAN NUON CHEA AND
DEPUTY PM FOR DEFENSE SON SEN ARE REGARDED AS A FACTION
DISTINCT FROM POL POT-IENG SARY BUT APPARENTLY WITHOUT
LINKS TO HANOI. MFA SHARES OUR CURIOSITY ABOUT
JOURNALISTIC REPORTS THAT SO VANNA (SALOTH SAR'S
(POL POT'S) DEPUTY MILITARY ACTIVITY CHIEF DURING THE
REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE) IS LEADING RESISTANCE FORCES
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AND THAT SO VANNA MAY IN FACT BE SO PHIM, FIRST VICE
CHAIRMAN OF THE STATE PRESIDUM. JOURNALISTS WITH GOOD
CONTACTS IN HANOI HAVE HEARD FROM VIETNAMESE THAT
SO VANNA IS SO PHIM AND THAT HE IS LEADING THE FIGHT
IN EASTERN KAMPUCHEA AGAINST POL POT. THAT HANOI WOULD
LOOK FOR A HIGH FIGURE LIKE SO PHIM TO LEAD THE

RESISTANCE ADDS CREDIBILITY TO THIS REPORT.

8. MFA ANTICIPATES MOUNTING SUCCESS FROM A HANOI-BACKED RESISTANCE IN EASTERN KAMPUCHEA, WHICH COULD ULTIMATELY TOPPLE POL POT AND INSTALL A PRO-HANOI REGIME. WHILE THIS IS FEASIBLE, WE ALSO SEE ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES.

(A) THE KAMPUCHEAN ARMY, UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF COMMANDERS IN THE EASTERN WAR THEATER OR EVEN OF DEPUTY PM FOR DEFENSE SON SEN, COULD REVOLT, DEMAND AN END TO THE DEBILITATING CONFLICT WITH HANOI, AND TAKE CONTROL IN PHNOM PENH.

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
-----055376 190824Z /12

R 181224Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9709
INFO AMCONSUL HONG KONG
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
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(B) REGIONAL MILITARY/POLITICAL COMMANDERS IN ANY SECTION OF THE COUNTRY COULD REBEL AND ATTEMPT TO OUST POL POT. SUCH INSTABILITY HAS ALREADY OCCURED IN THE WESTERN REGIONS OF KAMPUCHEA, LEADING TO PURGES IN 1977 AND 1978.

(C) WHILE SEEMINGLY LESS LIKELY, A SPONTANEOUS, POPULAR UPRISING COULD MUSHROOM INTO WIDESPREAD REVOLT AND MILITARY INSURRECTION LEADING TO THE DOWNFALL OF THE GOVERNMENT IN PHNOM PENH OR EVEN TO A BREAKDOWN OF KHMER UNITY.

(D) EXTERNAL POWERS (I.E., CHINESE) COULD HELP FACILITATE A "PALACE REVOLT," WHICH COULD LEAD TO INSTALLATION IN POWER OF ELEMENTS OF THE CURRENT LEADERSHIP OR OTHERS WHO WOULD FOLLOW MORE PRAGMATIC AND LESS OPPRESSIVE POLICIES AND THUS BE LESS A LIABILITY TO THEIR (PEKING'S) OBJECTIVES AND INFLUENCE. PEKING SEEMINGLY IN RECENT MONTHS HAS GONE TO SOME LENGTHS TO BUILD UP THE INTERNATIONAL IMAGE OF IENG SARY.

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9. WHATEVER THE SCENARIO, THE RESULT COULD BE A NEW REGIME MORE MODERATE INTERNALLY THAN POL POT'S AND WILLING TO RESTORE TIES WITH HANOI. SUCH A GOVERNMENT MIGHT NEGOTIATE A BORDER SETTLEMENT WITH HANOI OR AT LEAST REDUCE THE LEVEL OF CONFLICT. HANOI MIGHT OR MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO ACHIEVE ITS GOALS OF PARAMOUNT INFLUENCE IN THE PROCESS OF SUCH AN EVOLUTION. EVEN WITH MAXIMUM SUCCESS, WE DOUBT THAT HANOI WOULD PRESS NOW FOR CREATION OF AN "INDOCHINA FEDERATION," BUT WOULD INSTEAD ATTEMPT TO USE THE "LAOS MODEL" FOR SRV-KAMPUCHEAN TIES. WE REGARD THESE AS OPEN QUESTIONS. CERTAINLY, THE DELINEATION OF THE KAMPUCHEA-VIETNAMESE BORDER, OVER WHICH THE FIGHTING HAS OSTENSIBLY TAKEN PLACE, IS A CONTAINABLE ISSUE IN A MORE FRIENDLY ATMOSPHERE.

10. IMPLICATIONS FOR THAILAND. BECAUSE OF THEIR JUDGMENT THAT HANOI WILL BE INSTRUMENTAL IN OUSTING POL POT, THE THAIS ARE DEEPLY WORRIED ABOUT THE PROSPECTS IN NEIGHBORING KAMPUCHEA. MFA OFFICIAL STATED FLATLY THAT BANGKOK WOULD PREFER THE PRESENT REGIME TO ANY REGIME BEHOLDEN TO HANOI. MOREOVER, PARTLY FOR THIS REASON, THE RTG HAS WORKED HARD TO NORMALIZE RELATIONS WITH THE REGIME IN PHNOM PENH. EXCEPT FOR MANILA, THE OTHER ASEAN STATES HAVE ALSO SOUGHT TO DEVELOP TIES WITH KAMPUCHEA. TO THE THAIS, VIETNAMESE ASCENDENCY IN KAMPUCHEA WOULD PROVIDE HANOI GREATER MEANS IN THE SHORT RUN TO WIN INFLUENCE IN THE PEKING-ORIENTED COMMUNIST INSURGENCY IN THAILAND AND POTENTIALLY TO POSE A DIRECT MILITARY THREAT TO THAILAND AT SOME FUTURE STAGE. PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANT, IT WOULD AFFECT THE OVERALL CLIMATE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFIDENCE. BUT THE THAIS ALSO RECOGNIZE THEY CAN DO LITTLE TO PREVENT THIS.

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11. THE RTG, ESPECIALLY THE KRIANGSAK GOVERNMENT, HAS GONE TO GREAT LENGTHS TO CULTIVATE RELATIONS WITH PEKING IN THE HOPES OF RESTRAINING VIETNAM. WHILE THE FAILURE OF THE PRC POLICY TO PRESERVE THE INDEPENDENCE OF KAMPUCHEA WOULD BE SEEN AS A SERIOUS SETBACK TO PEKING AND MIGHT RAISE DOUBTS ABOUT THE EFFICACY OF THE PEKING CONNECTION, BANGKOK WOULD, NEVERTHELESS, CONTINUE TO ATTACH HIGHEST IMPORTANCE TO DEVELOPING TIES WITH THE PRC. HOWEVER, EXTENSION OF VIETNAMESE INFLUENCE OVER KAMPUCHEA COULD ALSO RESULT IN AN RTG ATTEMPT TO BRING RELATIONS WITH HANOI'S PATRONS IN MOSCOW INTO GREATER BALANCE WITH THAI RELATIONS WITH THE PRC. WE WOULD ALSO ANTICIPATE INCREASED EFFORTS BY BANGKOK TO STRENGTHEN BONDS WITH THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ASEAN CONNECTIONS.

12. REACTION WOULD BE STRONGEST IN THE THAI MILITARY, WHO MIGHT TRY TO EXPAND CONTACTS WITH AND SUPPORT TO THE KHMER RESISTANCE, CURRENTLY RESTRAINED IN DEFERENCE TO KRIANGSAK'S POLICY OF SEEKING REAPPROACHMENT WITH PHNOM PENH. SHOULD POL POT'S CONTROL APPEAR TO BE DISINTEGRATING, THERE MIGHT ALSO BE PRESSURES IN THE THAI MILITARY TO CONDUCT LIMITED MILITARY OPERATIONS IN THE BORDER AREAS OF NORTHEASTERN KAMPUCHEA.

13. IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY. NEITHER THE KHMERS NOR THE WORLD WOULD MISS POL POT. NONETHELESS, THE INDEPENDENCE OF KAMPUCHEA, PARTICULARLY ITS FREEDOM FROM A SIGNIFICANT HANOI PRESENCE OR COMPLETE HANOI DOMINATION, IS A MATTER OF IMPORTANCE TO US. SOUTHEAST ASIA HAS BEGUN TO RECOVER ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFIDENCE, BADLY DAMAGED BY THE CONCLUSION OF THE VIETNAMESE WAR. INCREASING PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFIDENCE HAS BEGUN TO EMERGE IN THE

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W

-----053268 190826Z /12

R 181224Z AUG 78

FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9710

INFO AMCONSUL HONG KONG

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY PARIS

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REGION IN GREAT PART DUE TO CONTINUING SINO-SOVIET
HOSTILITY AND THE INTERNAL PREOCCUPATIONS AND HOSTILITY
AMONG THE INDOCHINESE STATES AND BETWEEN CHINA AND
VIETNAM AND BECAUSE OF PROGRESS IN THE ASEAN
STATES THEMSELVES. MUCH DEPENDS ON HOW IT MIGHT OCCUR,
BUT THE DEMISE OF AN INDEPENDENT KAMPUCHEAN GOVERNMENT
WOULD HAVE DEEPLY UNSETTLING EFFECTS ON THAILAND AND
THROUGHOUT THE REGION. IT WOULD CERTAINLY AFFECT THE
CLIMATE OF SECURITY WHICH HAS PERMITTED THE RISING
INTEREST IN FOREIGN INVESTMENT IN THE AREA. ALTHOUGH
THE U.S. MIGHT MAKE KNOWN TO HANOI ITS CONCERN FOR THE
CONTINUED INDEPENDENCE OF KAMPUCHEA, SUCH AN ACTION
WOULD SERVE ONLY AS A MINOR INHIBITING FACTOR, AND WOULD
NOT LIKELY DETER HANOI FROM ITS AMBITIONS IN KAMPUCHEA.
NEVERTHELESS, WE MAY WANT TO CONSIDER HOW TO ASSURE THAT
OUR VIGOROUS ATTACKS ON INTERNAL POLICIES IN KAMPUCHEA DO
NOT MISLEAD HANOI AS TO OUR INTEREST IN THE CONTINUED
EXISTENCE OF AN INDEPENDENT KAMPUCHEA. ABRAMOWITZ

NOTE BY OC/T: NOT PASSED CINCPAC.

SECRET

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POLITICAL STABILITY, GOVERNMENT REFORM
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 18 aug 1978
Decaption Date: 20 Mar 2014
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978BANGKO23954
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: X1
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780339-1039
Format: TEL
From: BANGKOK
Handling Restrictions:
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780845/aaaablpe.tel
Line Count: 419
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 1040e360-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION SS
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 8
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Reference: 78 BANGKOK 10552, 78 BANGKOK 21758
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 17 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 1686551
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: VULNERABILITY OF THE PHNOM PENH REGIME
TAGS: PEPR, PBOR, MOPS, PINS, CB, VM
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/1040e360-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014